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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the news acquisition habits of students and their knowledge of the news. Differences in the performance of males and females were compared. Two thousand, eighth- and eleventh-grade students from four school districts in Virginia were administered a current events test and asked to respond to questions about their viewing habits concerning the use of mass media. All students were enrolled in social studies classes at the time of testing. Rural, urban, and suburban schools were represented in the study. Results include the following. Both sexes chose television as their main and most accurate source of news information. Newspapers trailed far behind followed by parents, classes, friends, and news magazines. Even though nearly half of the students indicated that they discussed the news in their social studies classroom daily or several times a week, they failed to identify the classroom as a primary source of information. Regarding knowledge achievement, boys scored higher than girls on the test. Boys did considerably better than girls on questions related to international and national events. On items involving state news, both groups were very similar. Concerning news acquisition habits, the boys watched both local and national television news more than girls. They also read a daily newspaper more than girls. Boys had an overwhelming preference for sports while girls strongly like human interest stories on the local television news. (Author/RM)

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STUDENTS AND THE NEWS: PATTERNS OF KNOWLEDGE AND ACQUISITION

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

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RESEARCH OVERVIEW

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A fundamental belief consistently included in social studies education guidelines, objectives statements and curriculum position papers is that social studies should deal with the contemporary world. The "Essentials of the Social Studies" and the "revision of the NCSS Social Studies Curriculum Guidelines," both from NCSS, as well as the "1981-82 Citizenship and Social Studies Objectives" of the National Assessment of Educational Progress project give great attention to contemporary problem solving and media use.

There is little doubt that knowledge of current affairs and the ability to utilize modern mass media are commonly desired goals by the social studies educational establishment. Millions of dollars and sizeable amounts of classroom time are devoted yearly to the task of teaching current events. School classes and libraries subscribe to newspapers and magazine programs designed specifically for the needs of students such as the New York Times, Newsweek, and Time. In view of the effort expended to increase student knowledge about current events, it seems puzzling why so little has been done to evaluate the knowledge of current events possessed by students and to determine how they acquire such information. Perhaps this lack of research in current events knowledge is due to the fact that such studies must be done rapidly before the testing items become outdated.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the news acquisition habits of students and their knowledge of the news. An important sidelight was to compare differences in performance of males and females. The existence of sex differences in the intellectual functioning of adolescents is widely accepted. While findings about verbal abilities, mathematical and visual-spatial achievement are well documented, virtually nothing has been reported about sexual differences in the knowledge of current events.

SUBJECTS

Subjects were 2000, 8th and 11th grade students from four school districts in Virginia. All students were enrolled in social studies classes at the time of testing. The reading levels of students based on SRA tests administered by the state varied from a percentile mean of 35 to 68 for 8th graders; and from 35 to 66 for 11th graders.

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PROCEDURES

The students were administered a current events test and asked to respond to questions about their viewing habits concerning the use of mass media. Responses were recorded on opscan answer sheets and machine scored. Intact classes were used and, while no attempt at randomization was made, participating school systems were selected to represent rural, urban and suburban settings.

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INSTRUMENTATION

The current events test was a twenty-four item quiz which contained questions about political and economic events occurring during a two-week period immediately prior to its administration. Other information about interests, habits and attitudes about news media were gathered at the same time. Since the test was one on "current events" it was impossible to report any data about reliability, as the examination had not been previously administered. When the analysis of student results was conducted, reliability coefficients computed using the KR-20 formula were in the .70 range.

FINDINGS

While the study found significant differences in the news knowledge and acquisition habits of boys and girls, it also found similarities in two areas. First, both sexes chose television as their main source of news information (See Table 2). Newspapers trailed far behind followed by parents, classes, friends and news magazines. It was rather discouraging to discover that the classroom was considered such a weak source of news information.

A second area of agreement was that both males and females believed television to be the most accurate news source. It surpassed newspapers by a large margin (See Table 4). It is interesting to note, however, that students scoring in the top stanines believed newspapers to be more accurate than those who made low stanine scores. But even for these top scorers, television was still perceived as the most accurate source.

Regarding knowledge achievement, boys scored higher than girls on the test as a total group and in each of the four districts. The differences were significant (See Table 1). A breakdown of the total test into international, national and state subscores revealed that boys were considerably better than girls on questions related to international and national events. On items involving state news, both groups were very similar in their very weak performance in this category. For the total test, the margin of differences between the sexes was seven percent at grade eight and six percent at grade eleven. When international and national news results were analyzed, excluding state news items, the boys outscored girls by a slightly larger margin at both grade levels, nine percent for eighth graders and eight percent for grade eleven.

Concerning news acquisition habits, the boys watched both local and national television news more than girls. They also read a daily newspaper more than girls. This finding is consistent with the higher scores of males and may indicate a relationship between the amount of news ingested and how much students know. A sizeable percentage from both groups very seldom or never watched national television news shows. More watched local television news than national news.

It was in their choice of news topics that the sexes displayed the most striking differences. Boys had an overwhelming preference for sports while girls strongly liked human interest stories on the local television news (See Table 7). These interests may explain why both groups watch more local television news than national as both subjects appear more often at the local level.

An examination of newspaper topic preferences found both groups disinterested in the front page. Boys chose the sports section as their favorite part of the paper with comics trailing far behind. Girls strongly favored the comics with social events being in second place. Little interest was shown in the editorial section of the paper by either group.

The role of the classroom as a news information source did not seem to be consequential when compared with television and newspapers. Even though nearly half of the students indicated that they discussed the news in their social studies classroom daily or several times a week, they failed to identify the classroom as a primary souce of information. The same results held true for parents, although more girls than boys cited parents as their major news source (See Table 2). Forty-four percent of the students indicated that current events were discussed daily or several times a week at home with their parents. Approximately one-third of the students claimed that they very seldom or never discussed current events at home or in their social studies classroom.

CONCLUSIONS

The study found boys knew more about national and international events than girls at both the eighth and eleventh grade levels. They also watched more television news, both local and national and read newspapers more often. Their news preferences were quite different from girls, particularly their great interest in sports.

The evidence suggests that interest in sports influences males to consume sports news and through a "spillover" effect, causes them to view or read other news. Another possibility is that girls have been socialized to have less interest in political news because of male domination of the political scene. Extending the relationship that exists between sports and politics further, both are highly competitive and involve a form of game playing. Boys and girls may perceive these activities to be male "turf" because of the traditional socialization patterns in the United States that have directed girls to less competitive areas. Whether sports and politics are related to characteristics of greater aggressiveness and competitiveness sometimes attributed to males is quite debatable based on current research on sex differences.

This study provides evidence that males and females are different in their news knowledge and news acquisition habits. If the cause of these differences result from varying experiences for males and females in society, then social studies educators need to re-examine the teaching of current events, and the use of media.

REFERENCES

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TABLE 1: ACHIEVEMENT TESTS SCORES BY PERCENT

	Grade 8		Grade 11	
Subtests	Male	Female	Male	Female
International News	63	53	74	66
National News	59	50	69	62
State News	32	30	38	36
Total Test	51	44	60	54

TABLE 2: MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS INFORMATION BY SEX

News Source	%Males	%Females
Television	62	52
Newspapers	18	18
Parents	6	15
Classes	5	6
Friends	5	6
News Magazines	2	2

TABLE 3: MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS INFORMATION BY GRADE LEVEL

News Source	%Grade 8	%Grade 11
Television	57	57
Newspapers	15	22
Parents	13	8
Classes	6	4
Friends	6	5
News Magazines	2	3

TABLE 4: PERCEIVED NEWS ACCURACY BY MALES AND FEMALES

News Source	%Males	%Females
Television	65	68
Newspapers	20	22
News Magazines	8	6
Classes	3	1
Friends	2	1
Parents	1	2

TABLE 5: FREQUENCY OF WATCHING NATIONAL TV NEWS BY PERCENT

	Male	Female
Daily or Several Times a Week	44	38
Once a Week	18	21
Very Seldom or Never	36	41

TABLE 6: FREQUENCY OF WATCHING LOCAL TV NEWS BY PERCENT

	Male	Female
Daily or Several Times a Week	60	50
Once a Week	19	20
Very Seldom or Never	21	30

TABLE 7: MEDIA TOPIC PREFERENCE

Preferred Local Television Topics	%Males	%Females
Sports	53	15
Human Interest Stories	18	51
Weather	15	15
Local/State Events	13	18

Preferred Daily Newspaper Topics	%Males	%Females
Sports	43	9
Comics	24	42
Front Pages	18	18
Social Events	9	23
Editorial Section	6	7

TABLE 8: HOW MUCH IS NEWS DISCUSSED IN SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOM BY PERCENT?

	Male	Female
Daily	12	14
Several Times a Week	33	32
Once a Week	23	22
Very Seldom	27	27
Never	5	5

TABLE 9: HOW OFTEN DO YOU DISCUSS NEWS AT HOME?

	Male	Female
Daily	13	11
Several Times a Week	31	33
Once a Week	17	20
Very Seldom	28	28
Never	9	8